



(Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, the Senior Rabbinic Fellow for JTS KOLLOT: Voices of Learning, is in Israel—teaching, learning and painting for the 2008 -2009 academic year. This is a regular series of letters from his travels.)

Democratic Values and the Modern State of Israel **Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz**

March 11, 2009

This past Friday night, our family had the joy and honor of being invited to Shabbat dinner at the home of our neighbors, Dr. Karen and Professor Yedidia Stern-Friedman. In addition to sharing their beautiful home and delightful children, Professor Stern-Friedman taught us about an organization that has become his passion: the Israeli Democracy Institute (IDI).

IDI's mission, according to their website, "is to strengthen the moral, normative, structural and functional foundations of Israel, the homeland of the Jewish people. Recognizing the Arab and other minorities as vital components of Israeli society, IDI aims to foster solidarity while embracing pluralism. Drawing on both Jewish tradition and the universal legacy of humanism, [IDI] seek[s] to generate the ideas, promote the values, and shape the institutions that will ensure Israel's future as a vibrant, participatory democracy."

Yedidia is vice president for Research on the Jewish State. Since 1999, he has been the head of the projects on Religion and State and Business and Democracy. His background makes this direction in his career and life of public service even more fascinating: prior to his association with IDI, Yedidia served as a full professor at Bar-Ilan University Law School, where he still teaches and writes; from 1994 to 1998, he served as dean of the prestigious law school.

At one point I asked Yedidia how he became so passionate about democracy. His response stopped me in my tracks. He remarked that the turning point in his life was the moment, in 1995, he discovered that one of his students (Yigal Amir) had murdered a prime minister of Israel (Yitzhak Rabin, z"l). This tragic episode in his life and the national life of Israel transformed Yedidia into a crusader for Israeli democracy.

As the Shabbat evening progressed, I learned to what extent he is a treasure of—and rare find in—the State of Israel. Unapologetically Orthodox in practice and theology, Yedidia also believes that Israel needs to do far more toward investing in and integrating its Arab citizens. To me, Yedidia is infused with a spirit that reflects one of the greatest needs in Judaism and Israel today—the need to build bridges with other peoples and religious communities and truly become an *or lagoyim* (a light to all the nations).

The encounter on this evening was all the more striking given an experience that my wife, Rabbi Miriam, had earlier in the week. As she boarded a bus in the Old City and began to take a seat, she was told by an ultra-Orthodox Jew to move to the back of the bus. He explained that, “this bus is a *mehadrin* (super-observant) bus and women sit in the back.” To which Miriam responded, “This bus is a bus of the State of Israel; you go sit in the back!” In this Rosa Parks moment, Miriam became part of the very real democracy drama that plays out daily in Israel. By definition, there is a serious tension between Israel being a Jewish state and its designation as a democracy for all of its citizens. Conflicting visions of government, citizenship, and statehood present great challenges to modern Israel. Avigdor Lieberman’s recent victory in the Israeli elections, in which his party walked away with fifteen seats in the Knesset, vividly illustrates the complex relationship with democracy. He, like many others, is a mix of opposites. Though he ran his campaign with a disturbing (and what many, including myself, consider racist) slogan (without loyalty, no citizenship), he is a proponent of the separation of religion and state, civil marriage, and a two-state solution. As I write this piece, it even appears that Lieberman will be Israel’s next foreign minister.

American Jews have a special role to play in reminding Israelis of the need to preserve Israel as a democracy. May the project that Professor Yedidia Stern-Friedman is engaged in—a deep commitment to Jewish identity and a rootedness in democratic values—become the sacred endeavor of us all.

Hag Purim Sameah,
Thinking of all of you here in Jerusalem,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Matt".